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Funding transformative research: 10 key stages

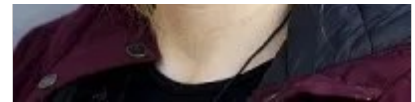
## **Funding transformative research: 10 key stages**

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### **By Flurina Schneider**

How can funding programmes maximize the potential of transformative research that seeks to make a real difference? How can funders support a more hands-on approach to societal challenges such as ecological crises? A group of Swiss transdisciplinary researchers and funding-agency staff identified 10 overlapping stages and their key ingredients. The stages are also described in the figure below.

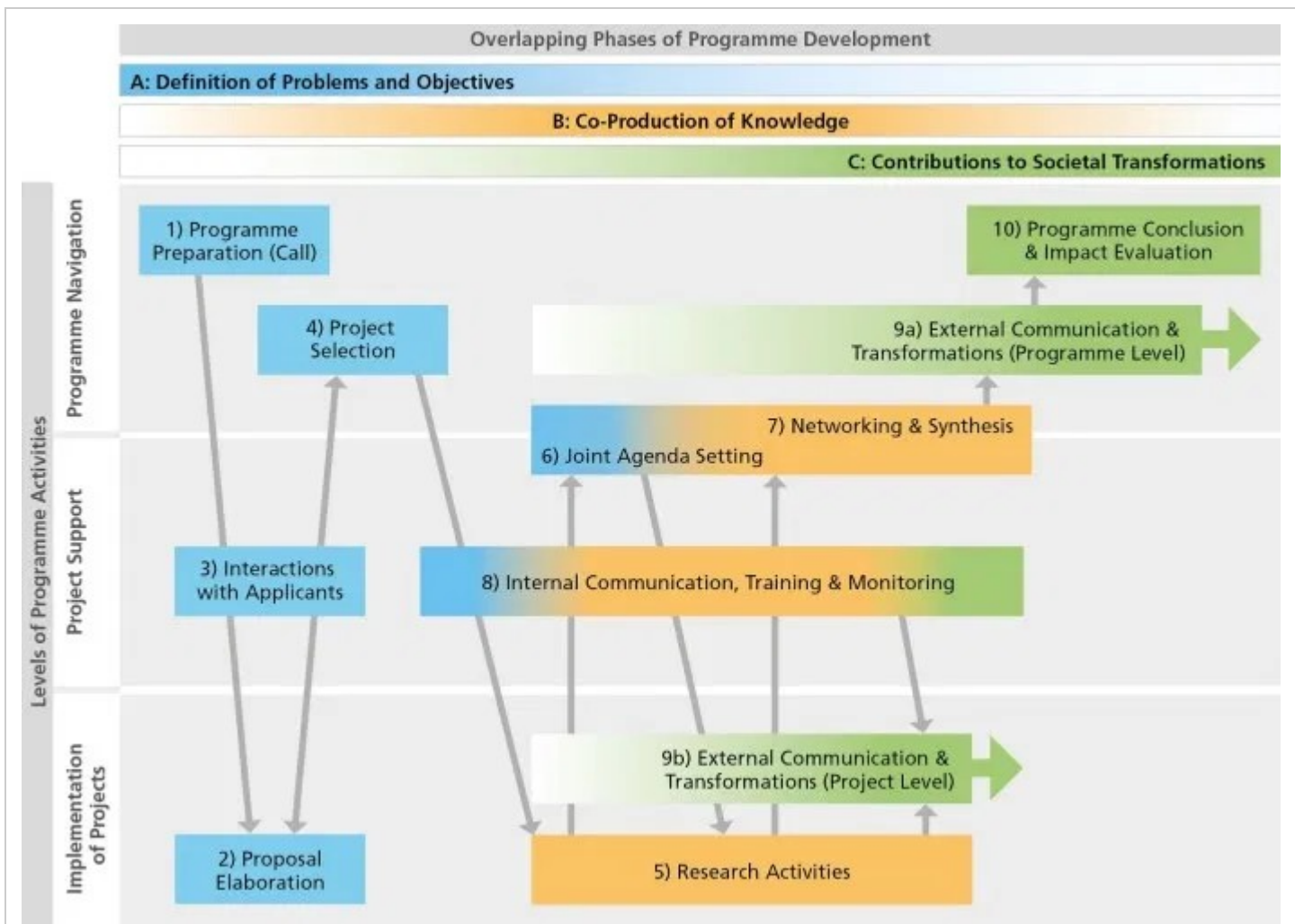




Flurina Schneider ([biography](https://i2insights.org/2019/06/18/funding-transformative-research/#flurina-schneider)  
(<https://i2insights.org/2019/06/18/funding-transformative-research/#flurina-schneider>))

1. *Preparation of the funding programme.* From the start, funding programme leaders should seek dialogue with all those concerned with the societal challenge, including decision-makers and affected communities. Only then should they create a formal programme description and announce a call for project proposals—while still leaving room for grantees (those who receive grants) to adapt the framing of problems and goals.
2. *Project proposal elaboration.* Transformative research requires teams including academics and societal collaborators from diverse backgrounds. These teams need time to form, build trust, and identify knowledge gaps and priorities for change. Ideally, teams will include senior scientists versed in collaborating beyond academia, but such people remain rare.
3. *Funder interactions with applicants.* The competitive nature of research funding often leads funding programme staff to keep applicants at arm's length. But nurturing a young field like transformative science often requires a more hands-on approach. This might include organizing training in transdisciplinary research, and giving pre-proposal advice to applicants about how to strengthen their methods or teams.
4. *Project selection.* This crucial stage determines the parts – projects, subtopics, approaches, and budgetary framework – that will build the greater sum of the research programme. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on evaluation criteria and procedures that do justice to the transdisciplinary character of research proposals. The projects selected should contribute to both scientific and societal aims. A mix of projects is crucial, with those taking a narrower disciplinary approach complemented by others involving an exchange with society.
5. *Research activities.* Once the projects begin and research gets underway, project leaders may need to adapt their studies in response to local people's concerns or the realities of day-to-day work with collaborators from diverse disciplines and social and cultural backgrounds. Funding programme staff can aid this process and ensure wider programme coherence in several ways (see 6, 7, and 8 below).
6. *Joint agenda setting.* Ideally, programme leaders will hold workshops early on that enable approved projects to jointly fine-tune targeted problems and goals with a view to synthesizing their eventual findings or impacts. Researchers can be encouraged to maximize synergies, for example by addressing different parts of

the same global value chain. As the goals of the selected projects might not fully fit the predefined programme goals, the latter can also be adapted accordingly.



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Conceptual model of a transdisciplinary research funding programme involving 10 key stages (Schneider *et al.*, 2019)

7. *Networking and synthesis.* As research progresses, it is helpful for funding programme heads to periodically convene researchers from all the projects to ensure continuing exchange and relationship building. Special ‘synthesis projects’ can be launched to ensure that transformation-oriented activities occur at the programme level, such as public information campaigns or the creation of widely accessible tools for disseminating results and visualizing data.
8. *Funder interactions with projects.* Funding programme leaders have several ways to enhance projects as the research progresses. One example is using annual reports to foster self-reflection among the project teams on their progress towards

scientific and societal goals, necessary changes required in the project, adaptation to real-world contexts, and lessons from transdisciplinary collaborations. Another example is that targeted training can be offered to foster skills in areas that science curricula often overlook, such as communication and public engagement. Finally, project visits by programme staff can help clarify remaining concerns.

9. *External communication.* Transdisciplinary research is ideally suited to accessible knowledge products, including decision-support tools (*eg.*, scenarios for climate change and adaptation), policy briefs, apps, and videos. Products should respond to societal collaborators' needs and desires. Funding programme leaders should also strive to create spaces for mutual learning by all those concerned with the societal challenge. These might include discussions bringing together scientists, policymakers and the public. Funders should also develop 'successor structures' to carry on the programme's work.
10. *Programme conclusion and impact evaluation.* Societal transformations take time. As well as mandating final project reports, funding programme leaders should fund longer-term programme-level evaluations. These follow-ups can provide valuable information about what works or doesn't work to effect transformation.

Transformative science requires transformative science policy. We highlight how the architecture of funding programmes could be enhanced to support research that prioritizes societal impacts. What do you think? Do you have experience with funding practices like those outlined above? If so, how effective are they? Do you have other suggestions for how funding programmes could better support transformative change?

### To find out more:

Schneider, F., Buser, T., Keller, R., Tribaldos, T. and Rist, S. (2019). Research funding programmes aiming for societal transformations: Ten key stages. *Science and Public Policy*, scy074: 1-16. (Online – open access) (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scy074> (<https://doi.org/10.1093/scipol/scy074>).

**Biography:** Flurina Schneider PhD is an integrative geographer and head of the Land Resources Cluster at the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), University of Bern, Switzerland. Her research focuses on sustainability, justice, and human well-being in relation to land and water resources. She is particularly interested in how science, knowledge co-production and participation can contribute to sustainability transformations..

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## 5 thoughts on “**Funding transformative research: 10 key stages**”

**Bev Holmes**

June 20, 2019 at 10:14 am (<https://i2insights.org/2019/06/18/funding-transformative-research/#comment-26509>)

Thanks for a great article urging funding agencies to bring their “best selves” to supporting transformational change, instead of just continuing to use the well-intended but not-always-appropriate competitive program models for every type call, as pointed out by Andrew. I love the line in the post “societal transformations take time.” An understatement, I’d say! That’s why I also really like the idea of “successor structures” to carry on a programme’s work. The research team that starts the work is not necessarily the right team to keep things going, even if it does (as it should) include research users. I’d love to hear more about people’s ideas on successor structures. I’ll also read the full article as well as Andrew’s pieces, and leave a link to a post by my agency (Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research) on our quest to work with other funders to hone our expertise. Many if not most funders have moved away from the “fund and forget” model, but I think we all agree we could get better! <https://www.msfhr.org/news/blog-posts/fund-and-forget-to->

[help-it-happen \(https://www.msfnr.org/news/blog-posts/fund-and-forget-to-help-it-happen\)](https://www.msfnr.org/news/blog-posts/fund-and-forget-to-help-it-happen)

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**Flurina Schneider**

June 25, 2019 at 10:03 pm (<https://i2insights.org/2019/06/18/funding-transformative-research/#comment-26856>)

Dear Bev Holmes,

Thanks for your encouraging comment! It is nice to see that increasing funders engage in reflections on the raised questions.

Indeed, the topic of successor structures is key, but so far rather underexplored. To my knowledge, there are rather few documented examples. In Switzerland, we have the formal model of a separate innovation funding body perceived to be a successor structure. However, this pathway to impact mainly fosters commercial innovations, it is less suitable for social or institutional innovations.

An example from the field of antimicrobial resistance: Research aiming to develop faster diagnostic techniques might translate to impact via start ups and inclusion of diagnostic laboratories (funded through the above mentioned innovation body). But research aiming to optimise use of antibiotics might follow a different pathway to impact. It might require awareness raising programmes and changes in incentive structures of hospitals or farm management to change behaviours of doctors, veterinarians, insurances or patients.

Hence, from my experience, success structures need to be adapted to the envisioned changes and the actors involved. Moreover, it might be advisable to even extend the thinking in 'successor structures' (understood as structures that follow the actual research phase to bring results to fruition). While this works in some situations, in others it does not, as it is a very linear way of thinking how spread of innovation works. In situations where complex, long-term transformations are needed, it might be more promising to explore how the research programmes can be linked to existing societal knowledge institutions or science-society-policy interfaces.

I would also be interested to hear from the experiences of others.

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**Flurina Schneider**

June 18, 2019 at 6:04 pm (<https://i2insights.org/2019/06/18/funding-transformative-research/#comment-26401>)

Dear Andrew,

Thanks for your great comment and the link to your articles! I agree with your observations. To foster sustainability transformations, far more fundamental changes might be needed in how funding is organised. This includes the very structure of the programme in competitive projects.

However, the goal of this study was to explore pathways for improvements of (existing) funding programmes together with the Swiss National Science Foundation. While some of these persons were very open to more far reaching changes, the overall culture of the funding body is rather conservative in this regard: Scientific excellence (and therefore competitiveness) is the key criteria. everything else comes just after it.

Hence, our goal was not to suggest a completely novel way of organising research funding, but to identify space for improvements within the existing structures. For example, what can programme managers do to create better conditions for transformative research, even if they don't have the power to change the whole funding body philosophy. And in fact, we think that also within the existing structures a lot can be done for the better!

In this sense, our proposal might be regarded as a pragmatic approach, but it is debated by the funding body and will hopefully leading to further changes.

Would be a great work for the future to also envision more radical transformations in funding structures, ideally together with representatives of science funding bodies!

In case you attend the ITD 2019 in Gothenborg: we have a session on the roles of funding bodies. Would be nice to meet you there.

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**Andrew Campbell (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969714016830>)**

June 18, 2019 at 12:01 pm (<https://i2insights.org/2019/06/18/funding-transformative-research/#comment-26374>)

There seems to be an implicit assumption here about a research 'funding' paradigm



based on competitive calls for research ‘proposals’ based on research ‘projects’. I would argue that the very nature of ‘the project’ is constraining the potential for transformative research on wicked societal challenges, and that setting up competitive processes is antithetical to the sorts of collaboration needed for effective responses to such challenges.

I work in an organisation (the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research ACIAR) in which most of our research investments are co-designed with research providers through a commissioning model, in which the intended beneficiaries of that research in developing countries are involved throughout the inquiry process, from design to scale-out. Our most influential investments tend to be decadal or longer, based on trusting collaborative relationships between different epistemic communities, not just scientists.

Check out <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969714016830> (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969714016830>) for more on the crucial triangle between research funders, research users and researchers. And see also: Designing applied research for impact by Andrew Campbell <https://i2insights.org/2016/04/26/research-for-impact/> (<https://i2insights.org/2016/04/26/research-for-impact/>)

Reply (<https://i2insights.org/2019/06/18/funding-transformative-research/?replytocom=26374#respond>)

### **Christopher Burman**

June 18, 2019 at 9:19 am (<https://i2insights.org/2019/06/18/funding-transformative-research/#comment-26368>)

Very informative thank you (as is the article).

Reply (<https://i2insights.org/2019/06/18/funding-transformative-research/?replytocom=26368#respond>)

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